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SUBJECT: (SBU) HCMC NEWSPAPERS PUSH BOUNDS OF POLITICAL DEBATE

REF: A) HCMC 218; B) HCMC 31; C) 05 HCMC 1151; D) 05 HCMC 1155; D) 05 HCMC 55

CLASSIFIED BY: Robert Silberstein, Political Officer, ConGen  
HCMC, State Department.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

CLASSIFIED BY: Consul General Seth Winnick  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

1. (C) Summary: Although all of HCMC's newspaper are subject to Party control and censorship, two of its leading national dailies -- Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien -- have become more assertive, even on some political matters. The newspapers, financially independent, politically well-connected, and increasingly professionally staffed, are challenging some Party red lines. They are reporting more vigorously and objectively on a wide range of sensitive issues. Tuoi Tre has become the de facto voice of the reform camp in the run up to the 10th Party Congress. The two newspapers have pushed the envelope of permissible political discussion, although this political debate is modest by Western standards. End Summary.

Introduction: HCMC's News Dailies  
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2. (U) Communist Party doctrine calls for newspapers to be "tools of the Party, a forum for the people." All of HCMC's newspapers are affiliated directly with the Party or with mass organizations under Party control such as the Fatherland Front or Women's Union. The newspaper with the widest circulation in HCMC is the "Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh" (HCMC Police), with over 500,000 copies daily. A true tabloid, the paper features coverage of blood-and-gore crimes, prostitution rings and street violence. "Phu Nu HCMC" (HCMC Women), administered by the Women's Union, has a circulation of 200,000, but sticks to a narrow social agenda. The bland and statist "Saigon Giai Phong" (Saigon Liberation) -- the Party's official mouthpiece in HCMC -- has a declared circulation of 80,000, but is largely distributed to Government and Party offices and State-owned enterprises. Other specialized HCMC dailies include the Vietnamese and English-language editions of the Saigon Economic Times, and the business news daily Saigon Times. There are two religious newspapers in HCMC: "Giac Ngo" (Enlightenment) and "Cong Giao va Dan Toc" (Catholicism and the Nation), with very limited circulation.

3. (SBU) Over the past few years, Tuoi Tre, with a circulation of 370,000, and Thanh Nien, with a circulation of 200,000, have emerged as more objective and professional -- and popular -- voices on the HCMC media scene. The two dailies, technically under the HCMC Youth Union and Youth Federation, respectively, have spearheaded open debate on a variety of issues such as education, the business environment, state monopolies, official corruption, land laws, night club regulations, transportation and protection of intellectual property rights. Tuoi Tre in particular has risked publishing articles by pro-reform activists, especially in the run-up to the 10th Party Congress.

Government and Party Control....  
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4. (C) In theory, all newspapers must take instruction from their parent organizations. Each newspaper also has its own Party cell; the Secretary of that Party cell acts as a quasi-political commissar and often sits on the newspaper's editorial board. Additionally, the party's Ideology and Culture Committee, both locally in HCMC and in Hanoi, closely oversees the content and political and editorial tone of HCMC's dailies.

The Ideology and Culture Committee organizes weekly meetings with all senior newspaper editors. In these meetings, Party representatives review the past week's editions, criticize or praise newspapers on what they have published and give "directions" on how to report on key social, domestic and foreign policy issues. A Party insider tells us that a common reproach is that Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien are too negative about the Party and the GVN, and fail to build a "constructive mood in society."

#### ....Leads to Overt Censorship

15. (C) Our contacts within the industry told us of a number of recent incidents in which the Party clamped down or altered how the HCMC press managed news and advertising:

-- In December 2005, Tuoi Tre ran a report of violent land disputes in China between police and villagers. The Party's Ideology and Culture Committee reprimanded the paper, which stopped reporting on the matter. (Comment: Although smaller in scale, conflicts over land and land compensation are often a source of friction and resentment between ordinary Vietnamese and GVN and Party officials.)

-- HCMC's two major dailies ran extensive, early coverage of the January 2005 confrontation between Vietnamese fishermen and the Chinese Navy in the Gulf of Tonkin, in which eight Vietnamese fishermen were killed. Reporting was hostile in tone, describing in detail the anguish of the deceased's families. Within a week, the central-level Committee for Culture and Ideology Committee sent a directive ordering discontinuation of reporting so that the GVN could quietly settle the matter with China. The newspapers complied, albeit grudgingly, according to our contacts.

-- HCMC's "Nguoi Lao Dong" (Workers' Daily) took the lead in reporting on a series of strikes at foreign-owned enterprises in industrial zones in HCMC and neighboring provinces (Refs A and B). The newspaper was sympathetic to worker grievances and leaked a GVN decision to raise the minimum wage. The paper allegedly used its trucks to distribute newspapers to striking workers. In addition to pressure from the Party, which criticized the paper for its activism, Nguoi Lao Dong's Chief Editor was criticized by HCMC People's Committee Standing Vice Chairman Nguyen Thien Nhan and ordered to "report wisely." Following the meeting, the newspaper ceased focusing on employee grievances and instead began calling for calm and joint efforts to find a solution to the unrest.

-- To promote its latest model of the Mondeo, Ford Vietnam ran a series of ads in major HCMC newspapers, featuring the White House and an American flag as background. Party authorities reportedly banned the ad. After Ford replaced the background with other symbols, the ad ran smoothly.

16. (C) Reporters who are invited to study or participate in activities abroad such as the International Visitor Program must seek approval from their parent organization as well as the Party's Ideology Committee. According to some of our IV candidates, the invitee can be expected to be grilled on clandestine linkages or personal arrangements with the inviting organization. In major newspapers, reporters' passports are held by their parent organizations and released only a few days before a trip (if the person is allowed to go), and retrieved a few days after return. If the nature of the trip is considered particularly sensitive, approval must come from Hanoi. In one case, a reporter from Thanh Nien invited to take part in "Counter Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policies" IV program had to be approved by Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan.

#### ....And Self-Censorship

17. (C) After decades of Party "direction," reporters and editors have a good sense of where the red lines are; they tell us that they routinely self-censor to avoid subsequent problems. For example, political arrests and trials do not get reported unless explicitly approved by the Party. Reports of domestic unrest, such as protests in the Central Highlands, are only covered well after they take place, and are spun to support the Party line that the "instigators had admitted their mistakes." Editors focus on ensuring appropriate size and placement of photos and news about Party and GVN leaders. International affairs reporters know better than to refer to hunger in North Korea. The color revolutions in Eastern Europe were reported as major international events, but pro-democracy NGOs were accused of conspiring to cause upheaval.

18. (C) Although press coverage of corruption has increased, even seasoned and professional reporters are reluctant to push many investigations to their logical conclusion. One reporter told us that he could easily identify the many and lavish properties belonging to the Party elite and their children, but "would not dare" to file a report. No editor would touch the story in any case, the reporter said. In late 2005, Tuoi Tre published a

series of articles on the near-collapse of a key bridge in downtown HCMC, linking the issue to corruption in the contracting process. The director of the building company responsible for the bridge's construction is a younger brother of HCMC People's Committee Chairman Le Thanh Hai, but his name was omitted from the series of articles. After the city moved quickly to repair the damage, press coverage was dropped.

#### Changing Tide?

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9. (C) Despite the pressure and self-censorship, Thanh Nien and Tuoi Tre have become somewhat more assertive. Both papers are financially independent. They also are cash cows for their administering bodies. For example, in 2004, Thanh Nien provided 12 billion VND (over USD 750,000) to the central-level Youth Union, topping the list of contributors. The two papers also flex their financial muscle to build popularity by supporting local charity and scholarship initiatives.

10. (C) As the newspapers' financial strength rests on sales, editors recognize that the desires of the Party must be balanced against demands from the general public for greater and more

objective coverage of pocketbook issues such as land registration, water supply, taxes, healthcare and education. Invariably, problems, and the subsequent media's focus involve, corruption and Government mismanagement. In Vietnam's opaque political system, Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien feed off political and personal rivalries within the Party. Scandals "uncovered" by the press often come from tip-offs from police with the support from groups or individuals in the Party or Government.

11. (C) Tuoi Tre and Thanh Nien have many staff members who are relatively young with an open worldview. They have no direct "American War" experience. Their formative years were in the poverty-stricken, post-war period of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy in Vietnam. They value Doi Moi -- economic reform -- and want to see the process continue. Some have studied journalism in Europe, Australia and the United States. Among them are a few Fulbrighters, Humphrey Fellows and IV grantees. (Thus far, the Party has not permitted Tuoi Tre journalists to travel on the IV program.) A number of journalists have described to us their ambition to be as independent and professional as their colleagues overseas. They routinely bypass GVN firewalls to read blocked websites (including Radio Free Asia and Voice of America), although they cannot cite or use information from these sources. Our contacts are annoyed by the constraints that the Party places on them and want to speed up the slow pace of change. Senior editors see their futures in building strong print and Internet news companies that they could profit from when they are eventually equitized.

#### Pushing the Envelope: Tuoi Tre in the Lead

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12. (C) Although the Party has periodically attempted to rein in Tuoi Tre, going as far as to replace its Chief Editor in June 2003, its coverage remains progressive. For example, it showcased former Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet's calls for aggressive political and economic reform (Ref C), resisted direct orders from Hanoi to attack democracy activist Hoang Minh Chinh (Ref D) and organized an unprecedented defense of one of its journalists (Lan Anh) after police accused her of "revealing State secrets" when covering the GVN role in steep price hikes in medicine.

13. (C) In the immediate run up to the 10th Party Congress, Tuoi Tre has further pushed the envelope of permissible political discourse. In January, after considering the matter for a number of months, the newspaper ran a three-part series by Nguyen Trung, a former Vietnamese Ambassador to Thailand and aide to former Prime Minister Kiet. Trung argued that the Party lacks the intellectual and moral capacity to cope with new challenges, and requires urgent reform or risks losing power. In one article, he noted that "the Party is a leader, not the entity that holds all power." In another, he criticized the lack of political pluralism in Vietnam. The newspaper followed up by printing readers' feedback in support of Trung. Within a few weeks, conservatives in the Party, including former head of the Central Party's Ideology and Culture Committee Tran Trong Tan, reportedly attacked the newspaper and Trung in private Party meetings, according to a Party contact. Newspaper insiders tell us that, for several weeks following the internal Party critique, Tuoi Tre management backed off, refusing to publish a "fiercely critical" article by a reformist, former HCMC People's Committee Chairman Vo Viet Thanh, and an article advocating a multi-party system by Vice Chairman of the HCMC Bar Association Le Cong Dinh. (Dinh's article was later published by the BBC's Vietnamese news service.)

14. (C) By mid-February, Tuoi Tre was back at it. It printed an article by a former Director of the Ho Chi Minh Political Academy arguing in favor of Marxist orthodoxy, but used the Director's call for strengthened debate of the Party Congress' draft political report as an opening to run a series of opinion

pieces pillorying the director's views. One such commentary, written by a founder of a private bank and former Chairman of the Vietnam IT Association, entitled "Who Exploits Whom," lauded the role of capitalists in building a modern Vietnam. (Contacts in the paper told us that Tuoi Tre's editors reportedly took the highly unusual step of signing a private statement indicating that they all agreed with the publication of the piece.) The newspaper also published a warm profile of Le Cong Dinh as a model Vietnamese professional days after Dinh was privately warned by the Party's Internal Security Committee to desist from publishing new articles on political pluralism.

15. (C) Thanh Nien has been more careful in the type and tone of articles that it publishes. Nonetheless, it leans towards reform. Thanh Nien's more cautious approach is a direct reflection of the discretion of its Chief Editor Nguyen Cong Khe, who has run the paper for the past 21 years. The fifty-two-year-old Khe is a true political survivor and has allies in both the reform and conservative camps. He is reported to have a close relationship with Politburo members HCMC Party Secretary Nguyen Minh Triet and Minister of Public Security Le Long Anh. Khe hired the son of Nguyen Van Chi,

Chief of the Central Committee's Internal Politics Protection Bureau, who is currently the head of the international news section of the paper.

16. (C) Comment: The quantity and style of public discourse in Tuoi Tre is unprecedented in HCMC; a few years back, it would have been unheard of for a newspaper to publish articles that even tacitly raised the idea of political pluralism or had provocative titles such as "Who's Exploiting Whom." Nonetheless, the Party has deep reservoirs of power and can clamp down on Tuoi Tre if it gets too far out of line. For its part, Tuoi Tre has been exceedingly careful and deliberate in expanding the debate one red line at a time, even as it pushes to open new space for discussion of reform and greater press freedom. Thus, while some tenets of Marxism-Leninism have come under fire, the primacy of the Party and Vietnam's "socialist orientation" remain taboos. End Comment.

WINNICK

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